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ABSTRACT

Western and Asian cultures may differentially influence the association between self-esteem and ability among their children. Differences in attributional patterns may contribute to positive self-esteem in European American children that is unrelated to actual performance, and more achievement based self-esteem in Chinese American children. In order to evaluate this possibility, 40 European American and 36 Chinese American children's cognitive self-esteem ratings were compared to teachers' ratings and standardized tests. The results showed that the cognitive self-esteem of European American children was unrelated to teachers' reports of cognitive competence and learning problems. This suggests that European American children do not attend to their performance when making self-evaluations. In contrast, the cognitive self-esteem of Chinese American children was linked to teacher reports. The Chinese American children appeared to be more realistic in their self-perceptions. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/EV)

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Cognitive Self-Esteem Among European American and Chinese American Children

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Abstract

Western and Asian cultures may differentially influence the association between self-esteem and ability among their children. Differences in attributional patterns may contribute to positive self-esteem in European American children that is unrelated to actual performance, and more achievement based self-esteem in Chinese American children. In order to evaluate this possibility, 40 European American and 36 Chinese American children's cognitive self-esteem ratings were compared to teachers' ratings and standardized tests. The results showed that the cognitive self-esteem of European American children was unrelated to teacher's reports of cognitive competence and learning problems. This suggests that European American children do not attend to their performance when making self-evaluations. In contrast, the cognitive self-esteem of Chinese American children was linked to teacher reports. The Chinese American children appeared to be more realistic in their self-perceptions.

Cognitive self-esteem among European American and Chinese American children

Features of Western and Asian cultures may differentially influence both self-esteem and the association between self-esteem and ability among members of these cultural groups. Students in Western cultures tend to attribute academic successes to internal causes and attribute their failures to external causes (self-enhancement), while Asian students engage in the opposite attributional pattern (self-effacement) (Crittenden & Bae, 1994; Yan & Gaier, 1994). In addition, students in Asian cultures tend to deemphasize differences between themselves and their peers, to believe that hard work leads to achievement, and to think of their peers as having similar abilities. In fact, when asked to rate their own competence, Chinese children have been shown to downgrade themselves in relation to other children (Stigler, Smith & Mao, 1985). In contrast, Western children are encouraged to think of themselves as unique and above average (Shweder et al., 1998). By the age of four, European American children have been shown to describe themselves as better than their peers in all domains. This self-serving bias has been positively correlated with self-esteem (Kashima & Triandis, 1986). These biases may contribute to positive self-esteem in European American children that is unrelated to actual abilities or performance, and more achievement based self-esteem in Chinese American children. In order to evaluate this possibility, children's ratings of their cognitive self-esteem were compared to teachers' ratings and standardized tests.

Method

Participants

At Time 1 (1995), European American (N = 40) and first generation Chinese American (N = 36) 1st and 2nd grade children and their teachers participated. The European American sample included 20 boys and 20 girls, while the Chinese American sample included 18 boys and 18 girls. At Time 2 (1997), when the children were in 3rd and 4th grade, 38 European American and 35 Chinese American children participated. All participants were from suburban areas and were comparable in terms of SES, family size, and the age, educational level and employment status of the mother and father (see Table 1).

Measures

Self-perceptions of scholastic competence At Time 1, children completed the cognitive competence subscale of the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (PSPCSA) (Harter & Pike, 1984. At Time 2, children completed the scholastic competence subscale of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Harter, 1985). The SPPC is designed for children from 8-13.

At Time 2, the children also responded to a questionnaire item, "How good are you in the following school subjects?" (reading, science, math, spelling, writing, social studies, art, gym) on a four-point scale, where 1 = not so good and 4 = very good. The responses were aggregated into a variable called "good at academics."

Teacher ratings of the child's scholastic competence At Time 1, teachers rated children on the cognitive competence subscale of the teacher's report from the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Acceptance for Young Children. At Time 2, teachers rated children on the scholastic competence subscale of the Teacher's Rating Scale of Child's Actual Behavior which parallels the SPPC (Harter, 1985).

Teacher ratings of the child's learning problems At Time 2, teachers also completed the 6-item learning problems subscale of the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS) (Hightower et al., 1986). They rated children's learning problems using a 5-point scale where 1= not a problem and 5 = a very serious problem.

Receptive English vocabulary At Time 1, children completed the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R) (Dunn & Dunn, 1981), where children choose the picture which represents the target word pronounced by the examiner from a plate containing 4 pictures. At Time 2, the newly updated Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT-III) (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) was administered.

Mathematics achievement At both Time 1 and Time 2, children's mathematics achievement was assessed using the Sequential Assessment of Mathematics Inventories (SAMI) (Reisman & Hutchinson, 1985), which measures the performance of children from kindergarten through eighth grade in eight strands of mathematics.

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Procedure

Participants were recruited from the suburban public schools and weekend Chinese schools. After parental consent was obtained, children were assessed individually in quiet rooms at their schools. At that time, questionnaire packets were given to teachers to complete and return by mail. Similar procedures were used for both data collection periods.

Results

At Time 1, the Chinese American children's cognitive self-esteem was correlated with teacher's reports of competence and children's mathematics scores, but not PPVT scores (see Table 2). For European American children, cognitive self-esteem was correlated only with PPVT scores. At Time 2, cognitive self-esteem was correlated with self-perceptions of being good at academics for Chinese American and European American children (see Table 3). In addition, teachers' ratings of scholastic competence were strongly associated with T-CRS learning problem scores for both groups of children. However, while children's cognitive self-esteem was positively linked to teachers' reports of actual competence and negatively linked to learning problems for Chinese American children, they were unrelated for European American children. In contrast to findings at Time 1, cognitive self-esteem at Time 2 was associated with PPVT scores for the Chinese American children and SAMI scores for the European American children.

For Chinese American children, cognitive self-esteem at Time 1 was linked to cognitive self-esteem (r = .47, p < .01), perceptions of being good at academics (r = .33, p < .05), and learning problems (r = -.29, p < .05) at Time 2. For European American children, cognitive self-esteem at Time 1 was linked only to cognitive self-esteem at Time 2 (r = .34, p < .05). Interestingly, teacher reports of competence at Time 1 were highly correlated with teachers' reports two years later for Chinese American children (r = .59, p < .01), but not for European American children.

Discussion

The cognitive self-esteem of European American children was unrelated to teacher's reports of cognitive competence and learning problems. This suggests that European

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American children may not attend to information relative to their performance when making self-evaluations. In contrast, the cognitive self-esteem of first generation Chinese American children was strongly linked to teachers' reports. It appears that Chinese American children are more realistic in their self-perceptions, suggesting that they base their self-evaluations on successes and failures more so than European American children. These results support the hypothesis that European American children are more likely to have a self-serving bias than Chinese American children.

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Table 1
Sample Demographics

	Chinese American		European American	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Age of child	7.75	.34	7.70	.32
Children in family	2.21	.55	2.41	.71
Mother's age	39.38	2.88	38.88	4.40
Father's age	41.77	3.09	41.62	4.84
Mother's education	16.73	1.94	17.18	1.32
Father's education	18.23	2.21	17.68	1.81
Hollingshead status score	59.83	6.81	60.77	4.63

Note. There are no significant differences on any of the sample characteristics.

Table 2

Correlations Among Ratings of Academic Competence and Test Scores at Time 1

	Cognitive Self-esteem	Teacher Reports	SAMI	PPVT
Child's Cognitive Self-esteem	--	.30*	.48**	.18
		.16	.02	.35*
Teacher Report of Competence		--	.30*	.23
			.46**	.24
SAMI			--	.49**
				.36*
PPVT				--

Notes. Chinese American correlations are in regular type. European American correlations are in bold type.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 3

Correlations Among Ratings of Academic Competence and Test Scores at Time 2

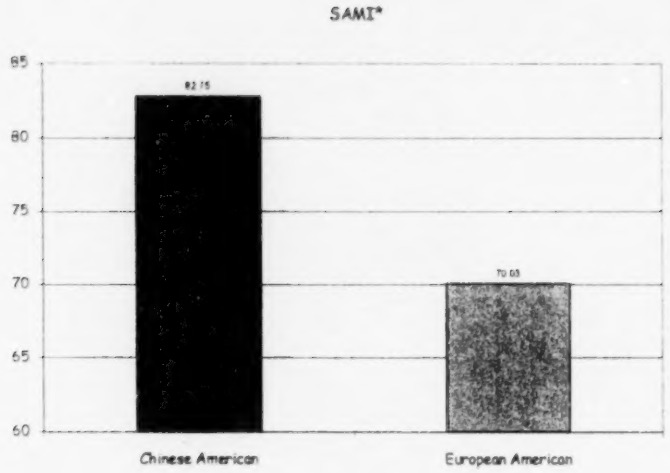
	Cognitive Self-esteem	Good at Academics	Teacher Reports	Learning Problems	SAMI	PPVT
Child Self-reports						
Child's Cognitive Self-esteem	--	.45**	.38*	-.41**	.12	.29*
		.57**	.22	-.08	.33*	.22
Good at Academics		--	.31*	-.39**	.12	.24
			.37*	-.25	.30*	.29*
Teacher Reports						
Teacher Report of Competence			--	-.82**	.29*	.32*
				-.72**	.32*	-.05
Learning Problems				--	-.32*	-.29*
					-.17	.10
Test Scores						
SAMI					--	.35*
						.19
PPVT						--

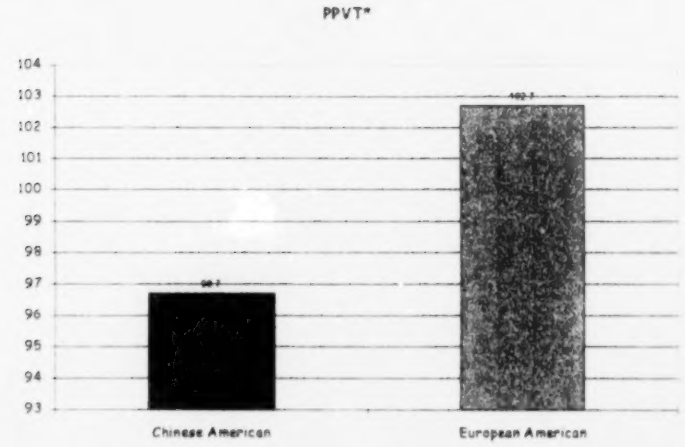
Notes. Chinese American correlations are in regular type. European American correlations are in bold type.

*p < .05. **p < .01

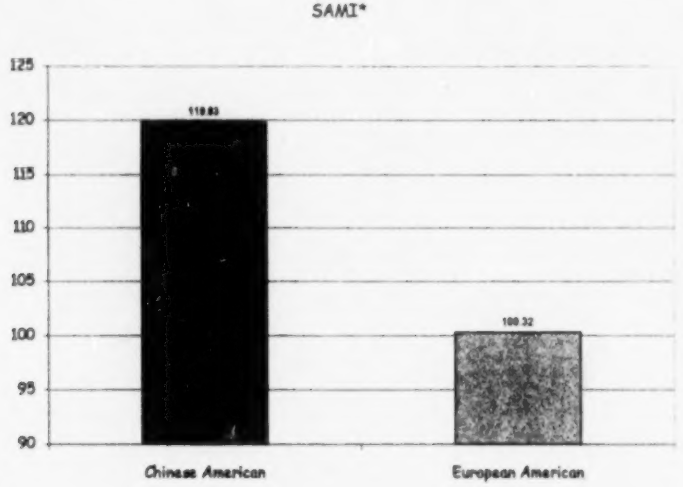
Test Scores (* indicates a significant difference)

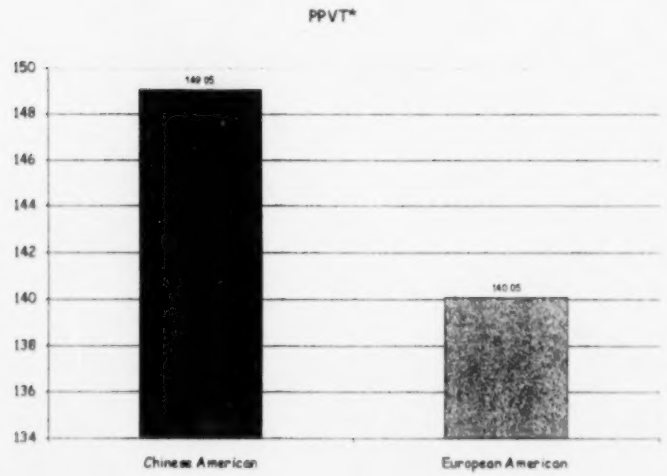
Time 1





Time 2





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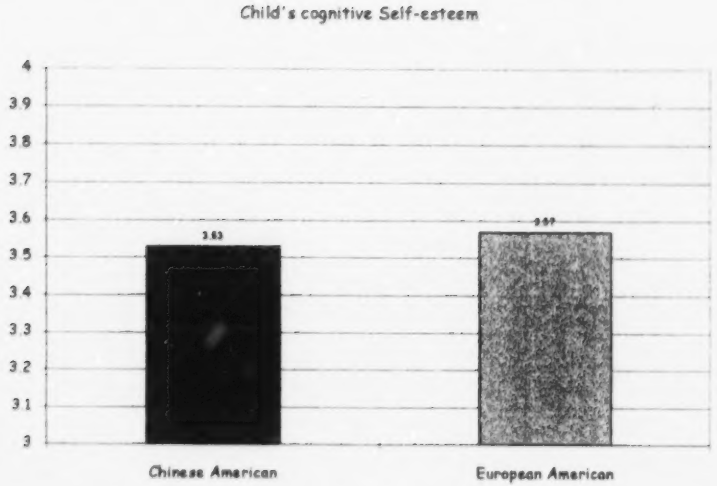
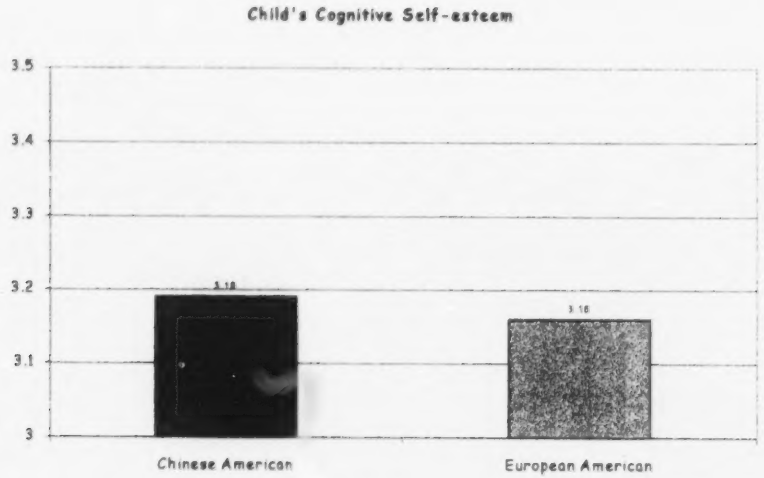
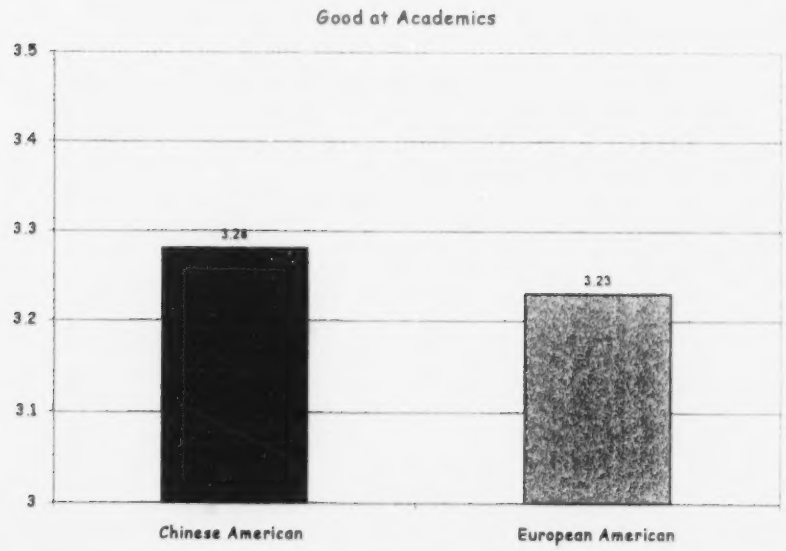
Child Ratings (*indicates a significant difference)

Time 1



Time 2





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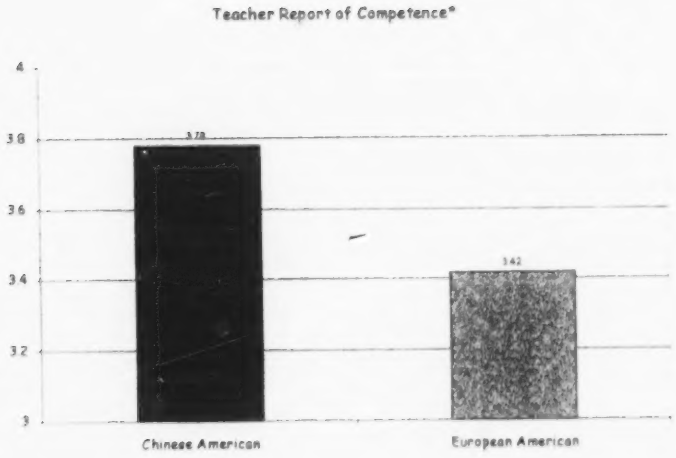
Teacher Ratings (*indicates significant difference)

Time 1



Time 2